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**Olafur Eliasson**

*Interdisciplinary Approaches and their Interplay with his Art*

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# Olafur Eliasson

## Interdisciplinary Approaches and their Interplay with his Art

*In dialogue with Else Marie Bukdahl*

*“It is necessary to unlearn space in order to embody space.  
It is necessary to unlearn how we see in order to see with our bodies.  
It is necessary to unlearn knowledge of our body in three dimensions in  
order to recover the real dimensionality of our body.”*

*Olafur Eliasson, Unlearning Space – Spacing Unlearning.<sup>1</sup>*



1. Olafur Eliasson. Film still. *Your embodied garden*. 2013.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Quoted in *Topology at Tate Modern*, November 2011 - June 2012, [http://ernahecey.com/files/FINAL\\_TOPOLOGY\\_PROGRAMME.pdf](http://ernahecey.com/files/FINAL_TOPOLOGY_PROGRAMME.pdf)

2 This film arose from a trip made by Olafur Eliasson to the Chinese scholar's gardens of Suzhou, China, with writer Hu Fang and gallerist Zhang Wei, choreographer Steen Koerner, organisers Lu Jia and Anna Engberg-Pedersen, graphic designers Huang Shan and Huang He, artists Julian Charriere and Thilo Frank, documentarist Tomas Gislason and landscape architect Günther Vogt.

## Introduction

This dialogue between Olafur Eliasson and Else Marie Bukdahl took place on the evening of November 24, 2014 at Eliasson's impressive studio in Copenhagen, which previously was the residence of the well-known Danish symbolist painter J. F. Willumsen. Thus even his studio shows an interplay between the local and the global and between tradition and innovation. Olafur Eliasson has always taken an interdisciplinary approach to his work – incorporating elements from fine art and aesthetics to science and social studies. Installation art has been very essential to him in that it takes the viewer's entire sensory experience into consideration. Overall, Eliasson's work seems to assert that contemporary art is activating more than the brain. It has progressed to affect the entire body of the viewer. That is why there are many parallels between his art projects and mind - body problems in philosophy, aesthetics, and especially in somaesthetics.

The following dialogue with Olafur Eliasson investigates his own interpretations of how he has merged the fields of art, architecture, science, and philosophy and has been sculpting a new interface between humanity and nature.

Else Marie Bukdahl

## The Dialogue

*The viewer's active role in the perception of art - a central concept in somaesthetics.*

**Marie Else Bukdahl (B):** *You have called one of your projects Your rainbow panorama (fig. 1). With the word “your” you want to stimulate the viewers’ own experience and active participation.*



2. Olafur Eliasson. *Your rainbow panorama*. ARoS. Museum of Modern Art, Aarhus, Denmark 2006–2011.

**B:** *An important point in somaesthetics is the interaction between the individual (artist or viewer) and the environment that he or she engages. Aesthetic experience is therefore never passive, thus an artwork is not complete until the viewer has experienced and interpreted its particular qualities. Is this point of view also one of the main themes in your projects and in your conception of art as such?*

**Eliasson:** Yes, I have even sometimes been criticized for emphasizing this idea to the extent that it seems to suggest that people in earlier times were passive. Others

of my generation, who were also interested in phenomenology, were convinced that the notion of an active viewer was a discovery. I think that we need to emphasize two things: first, that the idea of the active viewer implies that we have to go back and discuss the role of the viewer and what enables a viewer to be an active viewer. That is why I consider not only the viewer, but also the viewing process itself, to be key. Instead of saying that there used to be passive viewers and now there are active viewers, it is important to point out that viewers have always been active; we just never really thought of them that way. The second thing is more contemporary: it is about considering the viewing process as a resource that would allow the viewer to be part of the viewing process and to evaluate the nature of it at the same time – an evaluation that happens as part of the experience. In this case, construction and deconstruction co-produce each other. It is stimulating to think about this in relation to my use of ‘your’ in the titles of artworks; it suggests on the one hand that it is you who is generating your experience and also that it is your responsibility to reflect upon the quality of the experience critically or with self-reflection. Also, when I say ‘your’, I am thinking of the artwork’s ability to hold you. It is not only about the awareness of yourself; it is also about the not-yet verbalized emotion within you. In that sense, it would be an interesting thought experiment to think about the artwork as something that is able to experience being viewed and also to experience itself as something that can evaluate the quality of being viewed. So it is not only the viewer who is active. The artwork takes an active stance because the object also has intentionality.

### ***Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception.***

**B:** *Merleau-Ponty has explored the paradox that the human body “simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself.” This is why so many painters - such as Paul Klee - have said that things look at them: “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me... I was there, listening ... I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it.”*<sup>3</sup> *You have discussed this theme in the book At se sig selv sanse: Samtaler med Olafur Eliasson (2004). Is this concept still an important part of your concept of perception and in your art?*

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3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, in *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 162 and p. 167.

**Eliasson:** It is interesting that Klee's quote actually reflects what I just said. In the 90s I was studying a more phenomenological approach to sensing. I was interested in what conditions make us feel not just present here and now but also interdependent. If I make a drawing on a piece of paper, what consequences does that have? Can those consequences be read, in one way or another, within the drawing? This means that I consider the drawing in a more systematic way, as part of a network. I am also interested in the related question: what is the next stage after the drawing? As to Klee and the idea of creativity, I think there was a tendency at the time when he was working to think of creativity as happening within a single moment, where time and space were disregarded. Instead of focusing on creativity as a moment, I see it as movement. Before the drawing, there was an idea, and before the idea, maybe there was an intuition. And then it forms into an idea and becomes a sketch; the sketch becomes a drawing and maybe a painting, a sculpture, or a model. Then maybe it can be turned into a larger sculpture or even a house or a city or something bigger. In this process, creativity is not necessarily located at solitary points on this line of evolution; rather, each point has connections to what has gone on before and will happen afterwards, and to the time period in which it took place. Creativity lies in its context, its surroundings, which means it is also outside the drawing, because while the drawing itself might not necessarily be very creative, the way it impacts the world makes it creative.

***Body consciousness - an important term in contemporary aesthetics dealing with the body-mind problems.***

**B:** *Body consciousness, in the view of somaesthetics, has profound importance for our experience, perception, and action. Somatic awareness is an essential means for self-cultivation. "The body also works to unify space by serving as a bridge between the spaces of inner self and outer nature, and between physical and mental events."*

<sup>4</sup> *Does body consciousness or more directly - your own body consciousness - play an important role when you are exploring space, time, and memory and working with your large projects?*

**Eliasson:** Yes, it is important to me, and it is amazing that the role of the body is very rarely discussed in the art world. Vision is still the predominant theoretical tool, though once you move into the realm of theatre and performance this attitude changes. I like Shusterman's idea of connecting the notions of *soma* and *aesthetics*.

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4 Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness. A philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, 2008, p. 145.

It reflects my view of the body as well. As I understand it, somaesthetics implies that you are not only capable of shaping but that you are also being shaped. The body learns from different layers of experience, both constituting and being constituted, as we know from phenomenology. When we talk about the body, we tend to refer to it more as a container, whereas somaesthetics, for me, has more to do with the activity in or around the container. In my work, the idea that every experience is colored by what is already cultivated, by what is stored in the soma, is essential. We often believe that thinking about an experience replaces that experience for us, that it is possible, for example, to know what it feels like to walk around inside my installation at ARoS [*Your rainbow panorama*, 2006–11] if you just think about it, if you describe it very well. And from this, we make the mistake of thinking that the description can be the work of art itself.

Actually I made the rainbow circular because I wanted to show that you can keep on walking and that there is no end to the narrative; unlike in a square, where you would be interested in the corners, the circle suggests that the walking itself is the primary activity. It might even indicate that in the galleries below, inside the museum, the sequence of walking from one painting to another also carries significance in terms of memory and expectations and the production of experience. This means that somaesthetic experience should also play a major role in the conception of architecture. But architects often underestimate this today, because their sense of temporality is very weak, and they don't understand how to organize movement and the body in space.

In my work, I feel I can always use experiences of my body. Lately, I have been working in London with the choreographer Wayne McGregor.<sup>5</sup> We are making a project together where I am building the stage and he is dancing. Through seeing a choreographer at work, I have realized that I have been almost choreographing when I make my work of art, I am also engaged in creating a kind of choreography – although not always and not as according to a systematic approach. But in the spaces I work with, the sense of movement through those spaces is a constitutive element. The result is that the viewer or the user is the architectural pivot.

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5 “He is the Artistic Director of Wayne McGregor Random Dance, Resident Company at Sadler’s Wells Theatre in London and the Resident Choreographer of The Royal Ballet, appointed 2006. He is Professor of Choreography at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance and holds an honorary doctor of science degree from Plymouth University. He was the government’s first Youth Dance Champion, appointed 2008. In 2004 McGregor was a Research Fellow in the Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Cambridge. His work continues to explore the relationship between movement and brain science.” (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia).





3. Olafur Eliasson. Video still from *Movement microscope*. 2011.

In my youth, I actually danced a lot. I was very active as a breakdancer, and I became very conscious of where my limbs end and the space around me begins.<sup>6</sup>

***Art as experience - a core concept in pragmatist aesthetics.***

***B:*** Art and experience and art as an experiential process are central themes in somaesthetics, which emerged from a pragmatist aesthetics that recognized the body as the experiential core of perception and action. Experience as such forms - says Shusterman - "the generating core of my pragmatic (somaesthetic) philosophy, in theory and in practice. Most of my philosophical views derive from experiences outside the library. (...) Experience, for me, implies experimentation, creative exploration and involvement rather than mere passive reception, mechanical habit or distanced observation."<sup>7</sup> Is art as experience a central issue in your art projects?

<sup>6</sup> Olafur Eliasson considers his breakdancing during the mid-1980s to be his first artworks. see Joachim Bessing, "Experiencing Space," 032c issue 8 (Winter 2004/05).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Shusterman, "A Philosopher in Darkness and Light Practical Somaesthetics and Photographic Art" and in French translation, "Un Philosophe en ombre et en lumière," in *Lucidité: Vues de l'intérieur/Lucidity: Inward Views*, ed. Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montreal: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 2011, p. 280.



**Eliasson:** Yes, absolutely. As the years have passed, my articulation of experience has changed. I never follow a general rule, yet one concept has become very important to me: experience has something to do with trust, in the sense that people should trust the situation and themselves. I have long been interested in the experiences that lead up to encountering a work of art and those that come afterward. I am thinking, for example, of how we approach and arrive at the place where art is shown – it might be at a museum, but it could also be a street performance. The welcoming ritual has a profound impact on the quality of the experience of the artworks, and the whole sequence is part of, and inseparable from, the actual experience of the artwork. The experience of an artwork is part of the experience of the world and not autonomous. Ideally, stepping into a work of art means taking a step closer to the world, rather than stepping away from the world.

The same could be said about the studio and the museum. This is why I have always been interested in the issue of trust. It seems to me that audiences are most powerfully touched by aesthetic experiences when museums trust them and trust themselves. When museums are very insecure, there is a tendency for them to over-interpret the art. Without trust, a museum does not work on behalf of the viewer but at the viewer's expense. Occasionally you are made to feel that you are not good enough to be in a certain museum. It is often because the museum does not trust itself to exercise hospitality. So the experience of going to a museum is actually not only part of a highly intimate and incredibly potent sequence of moments; it also has a lot to do with trust, inclusion, exclusion, self-confidence, and the strong tendency for elitism in the art world.

There are two types of experience industries. One is called the “experience economy,” and generally when you meet it, you lose yourself. It gives you the feeling of losing control, the rules, the tools for navigation and orientation. It is like the funhouse at Tivoli.<sup>8</sup> You not only lose yourself, but you also lose your body.

The other type of experience is one in which you are lost but then find yourself again. You feel that you have gone blind. You misjudge the distance of objects and the length of your limbs. It is very interesting that if we lose some of our senses, it has an impact on our whole orientation system. But actually what very often happens is that we recalibrate; we reorient ourselves and discover new sensory principles. If an artwork is successful, it celebrates these new senses. In a work like *Din blinde passager* (2010), for example, we realize after five or more seconds that we have not actually gone blind, as we anticipated. This contrasts greatly with

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8 The *Fun House* in the Tivoli Gardens - a famous amusement park in Copenhagen - is a different and challenging playground for everyone. There are weird staircases, treadmills, rope bridges and slides. It features lots of activities that are fun and that can be used to train your climbing skills too.

what happens in the experience economy. It allows us to reverse the experience, to evaluate the senses that generated the experience in the first place, and it reveals to us that what we perceive is not natural and unalterable, but culturally determined. It turns out that reality is relative. Through such works, our senses and reality are reconstructed. This process, verbalizable or not, has therapeutic qualities.

***The ethical and critical function of art.***

**B:** *You have emphasized that you have always been “looking for the felt feeling that can shed values without being dogmatic or normative. I think this is what art can be about.”<sup>9</sup> Art projects sometimes also contain a visualization of the experience of what Shusterman has called “the critical study and ameliorative cultivation of one’s experience and use of one’s body as a site of sensory appreciation and creative self-fashioning.”<sup>10</sup> What are the ethical and social implications of your artistic projects? You have e.g. mentioned your focus on the interaction between ecosystems and society.*

**Eliasson:** I am convinced that the aesthetic and the ethical cannot be disconnected. Everything in experience that is important enough to theorize about systematically, I believe, should also be examined in terms of its ethical, socio-ethical, and political dimensions. On the other hand, there is a danger, in art as elsewhere, of always insisting that things have explicit ethical resonance. For me, as an artist, it is sometimes important to be absolutely non-ethical. It is not the primary function of art to be ethical, because art is just art and it can never, ever be anything else. This does not mean that art does not have an ethical aspect, but it should never be prescriptive.

***Art’s ability to communicate things that words cannot express or capture.***

**B:** *When I look at your projects, I think you are very much aware that concepts and verbal language never perfectly coincides with the language of art. In some of your projects one can clearly see that you, through the language of form, have been able to reveal perspectives and significances that cannot be mediated by verbal language in the same intense way and sometimes cannot be grasped with its tools alone. Do you agree with this?*

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9 Dream Boys: “A Conversation between Olafur Eliasson and Kevin Kelly.” See <http://032c.com/2012/dream-boys-conversation-between-olafur-eliasson-and-kevin-kelly/>

10 Shusterman, *A Philosopher in Darkness and Light*, and in French translation, “Un Philosophe en ombre et en lumière,” in *Lucidité: Vues de l’intérieur/Lucidity: Inward Views*, ed. Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montreal: Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal, 2011, p. 280.

**Eliasson:** Absolutely. I think it has to do with trusting the language of art because art is very resourceful, and it is also incredibly strong. I am very interested in its ability to create a statement that, by definition, is not verbalizable, because if it were verbalized, it would be something else.

Of course, sometimes it can be necessary to verbalize during the work process; for instance, when I want to involve a scientist, and I must explain to the scientist what, why, and how. But it might go from there back into a non-verbalized state. I really think we need to celebrate this capacity. It is almost as if we as artists underestimate how incredible this potential actually is, especially because in the rest of the world, the relationship between thinking and doing is relatively weak. The financial sector is very difficult to understand, and the political sector polarizes thinking and doing. It's only in the cultural sector that there is a tendency to acknowledge the importance of the connection between the two. Where the political and financial sectors fail, the cultural sector proves to be very strong when properly integrated into society.

Another question is: how can we, as non-specialists, understand something like the IPCC climate change report? The climate specialists came out with this report at the end of October 2014. In relation to this report, geologist Minik Rosing and I did a project, *Ice Watch*, using inland ice taken from Greenland. We brought some big ice blocks from a fjord outside Nuuk to City Hall Square in Copenhagen. An official from the municipality, who was helping us realize this project, remarked that if people do not understand the academic report, they just have to come to the square for five minutes and then they understand everything. It is about learning by doing; by bringing thinking into experience.

People nowadays (including media pundits) think that we can jump from merely thinking about something to 'having done' it. Art is very much about all the mistakes, all the troubles you go through in making the work; sometimes it entails suffering and sometimes it is a celebration. But so much of it is experience that is strongly felt. It is not just how I personally feel about the artwork; it is also about what the feeling feels like. This brings me back to what I mentioned at the beginning: that we have the ability to reflect upon our own feelings and sensations while we are having them. I think the concept of somaesthetic reflection is based on this ability. I have also used the phrase "felt meaning," because the feeling dimension is still expressive of our more primitive animal nature. A felt meaning is something we sense without the conceptual grid or architecture or words to attach to it. I believe there is great potential for art if we are daring enough to get hold of the felt meaning, without having to justify it in words in order to give it a place in

society. Our society's obsession with quantifiability and words too often robs the felt meaning of the value it actually has.

## Endnotes

**Photo credits:** Olafur Eliasson Studio (1, 2, 3).

**Abstract:** *This dialogue with Olafur Eliasson investigates his interpretations of how he has merged the fields of art, architecture, science, and philosophy and has been sculpting a new interface between humanity and nature.*

**Keywords:** *somaesthetics, cross-disciplinary installation, active participation, art of living.*

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